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Bills would benefit small businesses

A group of 16 Democratic state lawmakers drafts 14 bills in an effort to get the state to do more.

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The state could foster greater job growth and spur economic development by focusing more on helping small businesses, a group of legislators is arguing.

The Small Business Initiative, a group of 16 Democratic lawmakers, has drafted 14 bills that it hopes will ease bureaucratic hurdles, steer state agencies toward helping small businesses and create more of a nurturing economic atmosphere for entrepreneurs.

House Speaker John Richardson, D-Brunswick, said the bills are recognition that "If we are going to grow our economy, we are going to grow it largely from within."

The state has never had a comprehensive set of policies and programs geared solely toward small businesses, Richardson said, and the package developed by the group would correct that.

The state will continue to try to attract larger businesses to

locate or expand in the state, he said, but needs to do more to help the nine out of 10 Maine companies with fewer than 100

Proposals include boosting college loan programs, creating a '311' help line and providing an ombudsman to help navigate state bureaucracy.

employees.

The package of bills, to be unveiled formally on Thursday, covers two broad themes: creating an environment that helps small businesses grow and encouraging state agencies to do more for small businesses.

Creating an atmosphere that's friendly toward small businesses would include an "entrepreneurship curriculum" that would provide lessons on business creation and success from kindergarten through high school and college.

Other proposals include a new college-loan repayment program to help graduates who work in occupations where the state, or a part of the state, has a labor shortage.

Rep. Jeremy Fischer, D-Presque Isle, said the program would be similar to one that forgives student debt for teaching students who stay in Maine and teach in an underserved area for at least three years.

Fischer said loan forgiveness would give recent college graduates an incentive to choose a job in Maine over one with higher pay elsewhere.

"This is my attempt to level the playing field," Fischer said.

Another lawmaker is proposing a \$50 million bond to boost college loan programs for Maine residents.

The package also includes entrepreneurship internships for high school and college students and creation of a new court system devoted entirely to resolving disputes between businesses, and businesses and consumers.

The proposal requires state agencies to make sure small, Maine-based businesses are aware of state contracts that are up for bid and sets up a "311" phone line as a statewide business help line.

Other measures would create a "Small Business Ombudsman" to help businesses navigate the state bureaucracy and calls for appointing the Maine Regulatory

Fairness Board, which was created several years ago to help improve the state's business climate - but none of the positions has been filled.

The package further calls for the state to float a \$5 million bond to add to the Small Business Growth Fund and set aside \$1 million to be used as seed money for companies that are moving from the research &

development phase to the product launch stage. Businesses in that position are often in the greatest need of capital.

David Connerty-Marin, an aide to Richardson, said calculating the cost of the package is difficult because some measures would simply redirect resources instead of requiring more money. However, he said the price tags for some of the items are fairly modest, such as \$80,000 for the entrepreneurship internships. Other initiatives would be costlier, such as \$1 million a year for a new business/consumer court.

Richardson said, however, that efforts to boost small businesses pay off, over time, well beyond the upfront cost. He said lawmakers can continue to fight over "morsels" of the budget, or can help create programs that "can grow the pie."

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